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ABSTRACT

One high school teacher's experience in teaching Black literature is described. Suggestions made are: be judicious in selecting material for the literature class; be tactful in discussing it; be willing to deal honestly with the issues raised in Black literature; be ready to learn what it is that makes certain Blacks' works better than others and more suitable for use in a high school classroom; and be innovative. (CK)

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BLACK LITERATURE: IT WON'T BITE

by David B. Buzzard

Recently I suggested to a young, white, female student teacher that she might find it interesting and worthwhile to spend some time talking about some of our better-known black authors with her high school class, one-third black and three-thirds weary after nearly three and one-half weeks of *Great Expectations*.

Her response came as no great shock to me, because I have heard older, experienced English teachers say essentially the same thing: "I would be afraid to teach black literature. I don't know anything about it; and, anyway, I'm not black and I can't really appreciate the experiences described by blacks since I've never had them myself."

Perhaps it is true, as some teachers argue, that black literature should be taught only by black teachers, for only they have had what is called "the black experience." Perhaps. And yet, I'm still waiting to meet a wooden-legged English teacher who has had the experience of hunting a massive white whale, or one who has been ostracized by his community and forced to wear a scarlet letter around his (or her) neck; however, I know many English teachers who talk knowledgeably about Ahab's and Hester's experiences and who deal effectively with Melville and Hawthorne. And, each year, many more teachers do interesting things in connection with Shakespeare, although none of these teachers is a Renaissance Englishman.

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Still, many of the very best English teachers (age notwithstanding) can imagine all sorts of reasons for not teaching black literature. But a visit to the "Black Culture" section of a good bookstore or library should have the effect (a new-fashioned riot over the paucity of black literature courses could have the same effect) of convincing even the most hesitant teacher that his curriculum may need to be expanded to include some black writing, for it has indeed taken its place alongside the white works; and everyone, whether black or white, who teaches English should make some attempt to deal with it.

If we agree that many black works are violent, vulgar, and of questionable literary merit, then we must also admit that many of the white works traditionally used in high school have not always come off the top shelf. A major consideration, then, is the choice of black works which have at least some literary value and which are not so violent and vulgar that parents and administrators will begin heating tar and gathering feathers as soon as they learn what the students have been asked to read. If *The Catcher in the Rye* is still forbidden in a particular high school, then Baldwin's *Another Country* or Cleaver's *Soul on Ice,* for example, will hardly be acceptable. Let's face it, black writers often make the language and actions of unsophisticated, ordinary people come alive, and they frequently come alive in explosive, explicit four-letter words and scenes.

Too often, though, we English teachers wrongly equate all black literature with the "Burn, baby, burn!" variety of militant propaganda. To dispel this notion, I would like to examine a few black works which, since categories may be necessary, I would lump together under the heading "fairly-safe-in-most-communities-but-don't-bet-on-it"; obviously, no one can divine all of the variables in a given classroom, school, or community. Ultimately, the individual teacher is responsible for reading and making his own decision about any piece of black literature he chooses to use.

Probably the safest of the safe black works is Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), a conventional drama which takes its title from Langston Hughes' "Harlem":

> What happens to a dream deferred?
> Does it dry up
> like a raisin in the sun?

etc.

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Detailed character development and believable dramatic situations enhance the play's appeal, and the tension-release rhythm makes *Raisin* ideal for structural analysis. Personal dignity, and the individual's search for it, is emphasized in this play which is primarily concerned with what happens to the Younger family and the other people like them who dream of a better life and future for their children.

If the teacher is trying to break the snore syndrome which often accompanies the drama unit, then perhaps something like James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964) may be in order; however, the student or teacher who bleeps some of the "dirty" language in, for example, *Death of a Salesman* will be horrified by *Blues*. Likewise, LeRoi Jones' high-voltage plays—*The Toilet* (1967), *The Dutchman* (1964), and *The Slave* (1964)—are not designed for students or teachers who are easily shocked; I know one man who used *The Slave* with a racially mixed group of high school juniors. His enthusiastic appraisal: Every eleventh-grade English teacher should use it. My guarded reaction: Let the buyer beware.

Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), a book consisting of sketches, stories, a novelette, and poems, is a strange mixture of realism and mysticism, a sometimes confusing but beautiful novel which is usually ranked with Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as black writing of the highest order. Some idea of Toomer's highly personal and original style can be had, first, from one of the poems called "Face," and, second, from the first paragraph of a sketch entitled "Rhobert":

Hair—
silver-gray,
like streams of stars,
Brows—
recurved canoes
quivered by the ripples blown by pain,
Her eyes—
mist of tears
condensing on the flesh below
And her channeled muscles
are cluster grapes of sorrow
nearly ripe for worms.

Rhobert wears a house, like a monstrous diver's helmet, on his head. His legs are banty-bowed and shaky because as a child he had rickets. He is way down. Rods of the house like antennae of a dead thing, stuffed, prop up in the air. He is way down. He is sinking. His house is a dead thing that weights him down. He is sinking as a diver would sink in mud should the water be drawn off. Life is a murky, wiggling, microscopic water that compresses him. Compresses his helmet and would crush it the minute that he pulled his head out. He has to keep it in. Life is water that is being drawn off.

Don't be surprised, however, if Toomer's technical dexterity, perception, and depth of feeling overwhelm many students, causing them to respond, as is sometimes their wont, with "That's stupid!" On the other hand, the sensitive reader will get infinitely greater aesthetic pleasure from *Cane* than he will ever get from much of the literature he is asked to read in high school.

Richard Wright's classic, *Native Son* (1940), should provide enough action and excitement to satisfy even the most recalcitrant mechanic-to-be who loafs and invites his soul in the back row while wondering aloud, "Why do we gotta read that junk?" It is of course true that *Native Son* has several ghastly, violent scenes; however, I have talked with three Columbus-area teachers who have used it successfully and who, through carefully planned classroom discussions, have avoided embarrassing moments in class and angry clashes with parents and administrators. Some of Wright's other works—*Black Boy* (1945) and *The Outsider* (1953), to name just two—while artistically several cuts below *Native Son,* would make good additions to a supplemental reading list.

Bloodline (1963), a relatively short and critically unacclaimed episodic novel by Ernest Gaines, could be used profitably with students in any ability group, but it should have special appeal for the slower reader. The book contains five well-written, longish stories — sometimes humorous, touching, angry, bizarre. Gaines has a unique style, one more easily sampled than described in the following lines from "A Long Day in November," the first of the stories:

> I don't want wake up, but I'm waking up. Mama and Daddy's talking. I want go back to sleep, but they talking too loud. I feel my foot in the sock. I don't like socks on when I'm in the bed. I want go back to sleep, but I can't. Mama and Daddy talking too much.

Thoughtful, perceptive students, those concerned with man's fate and the human condition, should have the opportunity of reading William Demby's *Beetlecreek* (1950), an existential novel which has received mixed reviews. At the center of the book is Bill Trapp, an old white retired carnival worker who has isolated himself for fifteen years on a run-down farm situated between the blacks and whites of Beetlecreek. Trapp's involvement with Johnny Johnson, a fourteen-year-old black boy, and Johnny's and the black community's repudiation of him make *Beetlecreek* recommended reading for students interested in race relations and man's withdrawal from the world and from himself. *Beetlecreek* is a depressing book, perhaps because of Demby's use of stark realism, although it is not the explicit decapitation-conflagration brand of realism used by Richard Wright.

A small, swift-paced novel is *The Learning Tree* (1963), by Gordon Parks. (Like *A Raisin in the Sun,* it is also a movie, one of the few black works to make it to Hollywood.) Parks includes enough seaminess to keep students awake, and he balances it nicely with elements of humor, tenderness, and sensitivity. While *The Learning Tree* is not a heavyweight novel in any critical sense, it would nevertheless be a useful work for the teacher who is seeking an exciting book for use with average students.

Few objections should be raised about the use of James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), a collection of superb essays, many of which have already found their way into high school anthologies. Baldwin is one of the most celebrated of contemporary black authors, and *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), considered to be his most impressive novel, would make excellent reading for college-bound students. At the center of the novel is another fourteen-year-old black, John Grimes. Also of interest is John's father, Gabriel, around whom the other characters' difficulties are centered. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* we begin to get some idea of the emotional strain exerted on the black man's cultural forms as a result of his exposure to the white world.

A nine-year-old boy, Coin Foreman, is the protagonist of Owen Dodson's *Boy at the Window* (1951), a novel which deals (as do *The Learning Tree* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain*) with the loss of innocence. If some acquaintance with stream-of-consciousness technique is desirable in high school, then *Boy at the Window* (while many artistic light years away from *Ulysses*) will be useful.

The boys in a high school class (or any class, for that matter) would probably look without favor on the teacher who asked them to read *Maud Martha* (1953), a well-written little book by Gwendolyn Brooks. Consisting of thirty-four "moments" in the life of Maud Martha, this is the perfect book for the teacher who has a preponderance of girls in the class. David Littlejohn writes about *Maud Martha:* "It teaches more, more quickly, more lastingly, than a thousand pages of protest. It is one answer to Langston Hughes' question: 'What happens to a dream deferred?' " (*Black on White: A Critical Survey of Writing by American Negroes,* New York, 1966, p. 153.)

Any discussion of black literature should eventually touch on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) which Robert A. Bone calls "the best novel yet written

by an American Negro" and "quite possibly the best American novel since World War II."* (*The Negro Novel in America,* New Haven, Conn., 1965, p. 212.) But even this high acclaim might not satisfy the parents (a tiny handful, I should hope) who might complain that a few scenes make the book improper for high school students; however, it seems to me that of all the black works which could conceivably come under attack, *Invisible Man* is the one most worth defending.

In dealing with black literature, there may be a tendency to treat all of it—simply because it is black—as if it were therefore automatically beautiful. The fact is that all of it isn't beautiful (why should it be?), and the teacher should feel no guilt, fear, or shame in saying so. Nor should he necessarily assume an air of moral smugness by reminding himself and his colleagues that he is a superior, liberal being merely by virtue of his travels in the realms of black. There is no need for any but honest evaluations (free of guilt, prejudice, or superiority) of whatever is read. But there is no reason for not reading *something.*

Perhaps some poetry and short stories would fit the needs of a particular class better than a novel or play would. If this be the case, then the teacher should request (at least) a classroom set of black anthologies. Abraham Chapman's *Black Voices* (Mentor: New York, 1968) could be put to good use in high school classes. Other fine anthologies are Langston Hughes' *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers* (Little, Brown: Boston, 1967), Herbert Hill's *Soon One Morning* (Knopf: New York, 1963), and James A. Emanuel's and Theodore L. Gross' *Dark Symphony* (Free Press: New York, 1968). Francis E. Kearns' *The Black Experience* (Viking: New York, 1970) whitens the experience somewhat by including whites (Dreiser, Crane, Faulkner, and others) who have written about blacks.

In the end, it is preposterous to regard all black literature as something to be afraid of. Instead, be judicious in selecting material. (The LeRoi Jones-edited anthology *Black Fire* [Apollo: New York, 1969] is an example of what, for most teachers, could be an unwise selection.) Be tactful in discussing it. Be willing to deal honestly with the issues raised in black literature. Be ready to learn what it is that makes certain blacks works better than others and more suitable for use in a high school classroom. And finally, as Kenneth Kinnamon suggests, in "Afro-American Literature, the Black Revolution, and Ghetto Schools" (*English Journal,* February 1970, p. 193), be innovative, for "There is no accepted standard method of teaching black literature. Do your own thing!"

I recall my "own thing" when I first used black literature in a traditional (all-white) American literature class a few years ago. After a few days, I sensed that things weren't going as well as usual, and I asked the students what was bothering them. "You are," said an outspoken, intelligent junior. "You remind us every day that we are doing BLACK literature. You act as if we had never seen or heard of a black person. We aren't uncomfortable reading this stuff—it won't bite—so why don't you relax?" I did. How right he was.

Editor's Note: David Buzzard taught English at Wilmington High School from 1967 to 1970. He is presently a teaching associate at Ohio State University where he is working toward his Ph.D. in English Education.

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*Littlejohn, in a note, adds weight to Bone's assertion: "In a poll of two hundred authors, critics, and editors late in 1965, *Invisible Man* was voted the American novel 'the most memorable and likely to endure' of the past twenty years." (*Black on White,* p. 119.)